Books

The Economist May 18 1968

INTELLIGENT STORY

Room 39 : *Naval Intelligence in Action, 1939-45*

By Donald McLachlan.

Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 455 pages. 50s.

This book relates many sensational tales with deadpan accuracy and no attempt at sensationalism ; the author's restraint makes the stories' impact all the more effective. He puts down lucidly what he knows and how he came to know it ; when he does not know, he is not ashamed to say so ; he quickly acquires his readers' confidence, and proceeds to demonstrate over and over again how much stranger truth is than fiction.

His book describes the origins last century, the work in the second world war, and the postwar absorption into the Ministry of Defence of NID, the naval intelligence department which helped this country fight the submarine menace that almost defeated it in 1942-43. NID's organisation and methods are explained by a highly intelligent skilled observer, who spent much of his own war service in it, and is thus able to illuminate his commentary by personal knowledge of the strains and the characters involved. This understanding of his subject from inside, an almost indispensable tool for the historian of recent events, is wielded with comprehensive skill. We are treated to an informed account of what intelligence is and where it comes from : Mr McLachlan lists seventeen different sources, ranging from intercepted enemy signals, sighting reports, air photographs, and captured documents and equipment to agents' and prisoners' reports and the indispensable "open" information that slumbers on the shelves of technical libraries. The whole work illustrates Donovan's saying : "Strategy without information upon which it can rely is helpless."

It illustrates also the need, in wartime intelligence work, for civilian skills. Among the heroic figures, here described though hitherto unknown to history, to whom Great Britain owes its survival, one—Frederick Wells, long classics tutor at University College, Oxford—was employed as a "civilian officer" by the Admiralty, to undertake the collation of topographical data the world over. Another, Rodger Winn, rose to be a captain, RNVR ; what enabled him to become the "presiding genius of the submarine tracking room" was [illegible] as a barrister. That paragon among intelligence officers, John Austin, who has to be relegated to the limbo of jottings at the back of the book because he was in the army, was a philosophy don at Magdalen. (Wells and Austin are now, alas, dead ; Winn is a Lord Justice of Appeal.) These three were only the most eminent in a body of men and women who applied intellectual insight, with critical effect, to the business of war, which can no longer be left solely to the type of professional trained to conduct it before 1939.

The author takes care to point out that amateurs imported from the universities, Fleet Street, or the bar into the world of real war do need real officers to keep them on the rails of service possibilities ; and he pays due tributes to the leadership of successive directors of naval intelligence—Godfrey and Rushbrooke during the war, and Denning who presided over NID's incorporation into the new combined ministry. He explains also how a newcomer may be less hidebound in service routines than a regular, and less inclined to that dreary vice of minor hierarchs, over-respect for rank : a vice at which Godfrey constantly railed. The author seems not to be afflicted by it ; in a valuable list of principles of intelligence work, towards the end of his book, he remarks that "obsession and bias often start at the top," and that "Career officers and politicians have a strong interest in cooking raw intelligence to make their masters' favourite dishes."

Whether or not a similar crisis ever visits this island again, this book deserves wide study. Mr McLachlan proves in it that he is not only a distinguished journalist, but also a far more competent historical scholar than most writers on the history of modern war.

THE NEW SNOW-MEN

The Double Helix

By James D. Watson.

Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 242 pages. 35s.

Posterity may well be grateful for the persistence of a schoolboy habit. How else than with the help of a weekly letter to his parents, who had the sense to preserve [illegible] could this author have recaptured fifteen years later the detailed flavour of his two years at Cambridge—two years of collaboration with Francis Crick

minated in a two weeks' rush to discover the double helical structure of DNA ?

The biological implications of the discovery, which at one stroke provided the molecular basis of heredity, the subsequent cracking of the genetic code and all the heady advances since are left on one side. The book virtually finishes with the throw-away line in Watson's and Crick's paper in *Nature* in 1953 announcing the discovery :

> it has not escaped our notice that the specific pairing we have postulated immediately suggests a possible copying mechanism for the genetic material.

Instead, the author concentrates on evoking the atmosphere in which such a world-shaking scientific discovery was made : the disappointments, the insecurity, the fear that rivals would get there first ; the dependence on the work of others who sometimes kept their discoveries close to their chests ; the personalities involved, their quirks and their quality ; the peculiar loyalties of the scientific code of honour ; and the background of life outside the laboratory.

When the crucial flash of brilliance comes—and to the reader with hindsight it has seemed obvious for so long that the scientists appear wantonly obtuse—it comes as a glorious vindication of Crick's and Watson's basic conviction that the solution to the structure of DNA would be both elegant and simple. They thus had prepared minds, receptive to this kind of solution. This was the secret and their luck, for, as subsequent discoveries have shown, the structure of haemoglobin and of insulin—both proteins—has proved very complicated indeed.

There is a rare cliff-hanging quality about the book, with no hint that it is spurious or contrived, that invites comparison with John Chadwick's account of Michael Ventris's decipherment of Linear B. The excitement of discovery can seldom have been better conveyed. People get hurt in the process, although in an epilogue Professor Watson tries to make amends. He is particularly generous in retrospect to Rosalind Franklin, the X-ray crystallographer, who took the all-important X-ray photograph and who, had she not died in 1958, might well have shared the Nobel Prize that Crick, Watson and Maurice Wilkins were awarded in 1962. By writing a foreword Sir Lawrence Bragg is generously forgiving.

If there is a criticism to be made, apart from those that only Professor Watson's fellow scientists might know about, it is this. The scientifically unsophisticated, with a basic knowledge of chemistry, can probably understand the chemistry and even the stereochemistry ; but nowhere in the book is there any explanation of the nature of the crucial information provided by X-ray crystallography : the author contents himself with referring the reader to another work. There are two diffraction photographs but no attempt to explain exactly what they show.

But this book does not aim directly at explaining... In Sir Lawrence Bragg's